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ABSTRACT

The Nebraska educational system is experiencing internal turmoil even though its students are highly ranked nationally on standardized tests and show a higher ratio of graduating high school than those in most other states. This report was commissioned by Nebraska education officials who were concerned that their state was not taking a large enough role in new, innovative methods of rural education. In the form of a discussion of the "Rural Education Debate" in Nebraska, the paper suggests that school consolidation is an uncreative and inefficient ways of solving service delivery problems. It also questions once-popular views linking teacher performance and overall school quality to school size, number of courses, and amount of materials. This document argues that the limited but focused curriculum in rural schools should be able to compete successfully with larger systems. For example, Nebraska's rural districts have relatively fewer dropouts compared to non-rural districts, and their rural schools also match larger ones in standardized test performance. This document discusses the relationship between school size and efficiency, concluding that comparisons of per-pupil expenditures inherently discriminate against all rural school systems, which are small by necessity but are not therefore inefficient. Socioeconomic influences at work in Nebraska result in a widening of the rural-urban political rift. This report recommends a thorough overhaul of the school financing system and calls for creation of appropriate educational standards, not standardization. It closes with a discussion of rural and urban differences and the implications for their respective educational systems. (TES)

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CLASS DISMISSED:

EXAMINING NEBRASKA'S RURAL EDUCATION DEBATE

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CLASS DISMISSED :

EXAMINING NEBRASKA'S RURAL EDUCATION DEBATE

PREPARED FOR THE
NEBRASKA RURAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

BY
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RURAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT, INC.

WITH THE RESEARCH ASSISTANCE OF MS. LINDA HOKE

MARCH, 1988

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NEBRASKA RURAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

FOREWORD

When the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA) commissioned Dr. Jonathan Sher to study rural education in our state, it marked a turning point in both the history of the organization and, we sincerely hope, in the development of educational policy in Nebraska. It WAS an act that involved more than a little risk, but the NRCSA Executive Committee has come to believe that rural education in Nebraska is at a crossroads and that we need to take risks to move educational policy in Nebraska forward. The purposes of this foreword are to set forth the Executive Committee's reasons for commissioning the study and to explain why we think Class Dismissed: Examining Nebraska's Rural Education Debate will help change the way Nebraskans think about rural education.

Within the last few years, as educational reform has become a national theme, NRCSA has become increasingly concerned that the single issue of school size and reorganization has so dominated the educational agenda in Nebraska that no other issues can issues can rationally be considered. At a time when education spending has been increasing in virtually every state in the nation, state spending in Nebraska has actually declined, primarily because of the paralysis caused by the reorganization debate, Legislative activity in the state, as well as the dialogue within the major educational organizations, has become a game of rural-urban thrust and parry with the thinking among the players more keyed to scoring debating points than to developing cogent educational policy.

As we revived this problem, it became more apparent to the NRCSA Executive Committee that there is no vision of education in Nebraska. The fixation of both the consolidation advocates and consolidation opponents is on size and structure as if those components were somehow synonymous with educational quality. In addition, both sides seem to be committed to the proposition that, like cheap socks "on size fits all." Despite the fact that Nebraska is geographically, economically and culturally diverse, an underlying belief exists that there is only one right way to structure and deliver education in our state. This lack of vision, this absence of a mental picture of what both rural and urban education in Nebraska are and what they could be has severely hindered the development of a positive education agenda in the Cornhusker state.

The tragedy of this is, in the view of NRCSA, that other states are coming to terms with rural education and developing statewide quality education agendas. Extensive work has been done in Washington state and Oklahoma, for instance, on long-distance learning, Cornell University has published a landmark study on the failure of reorganization in New York state and virtually every state, save Nebraska, has acted in recent years to put time, money and

energy into quality-enhancing programs. There appears to be the beginnings of a national effort to think more creatively about rural education, but Nebraska, one of the most rural of the states, is not part of that effort. Part of the reason for this may be a complacency caused by Nebraska's high national ranking on educational performance indicators. In other states crisis has brought about reform while in Nebraska complacency may have retarded it. Nevertheless it has become increasingly clear that education in our state cannot rest on its laurels indefinitely and NRCSA believes that the time has come for a new look.

As the Executive Committee began to consider how it could take a leadership role in this effort, it realized that the lack of objective information was a major handicap. An outside view by a respected educator was needed. The Committee had been particularly impressed by the work Dr. Jonathan Sher had done regarding rural education in North Carolina and other states. His studies, Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom and Heavy Meddle (an analysis of school size in North Carolina), not only demonstrated that school size was not the determinant of school quality, but also opened up a discussion of rural education as being qualitatively different from urban education. Sher, in effect, changed the subject from a debate about the appropriate size of the model school to discuss about the appropriate model for the size of the school. This approach seemed, indeed, to be what Nebraska's rural educators were seeking.

Thus, NRCSA commissioned Sher to study the Nebraska situation on the understanding that his methods and conclusions would be his own and that NRCSA would not attempt to influence or suppress his findings. We fully understood that his findings might not be favorable in all respects to all NRCSA members. Dr. Sher's task was not easy. Over a six-month period he endeavored to read several boxes full of material about rural education and education generally in our state. On his trip here in November, 1987, he spoke to dozens of people within and outside of the educational community sometimes at what could be characterized as tedious length. But perhaps even more frustrating for a researcher of Sher's caliber was dealing with what was not there. One can share his concern about the lack of hard data on academic achievement and other measures of school quality, the lack of a clear-cut agenda for rural schools and the lack of any significant plan or program to make all of Nebraska's schools better (there is, of course, no lack of plans to make them bigger). Neither Sher nor NRCSA had any illusions about the fact that the study would be limited.

That having been said, it is also important to say that the Executive Committee feels that the Sher study is a singular contribution to the literature on education in Nebraska. We believe that it has the potential to move rural education in this state in a different direction based on three concepts. First, the size of the school unit is simply not the issue. The time, money and energy spent debating size can and should be spent debating quality. Second, rural schools are not just quantitatively different from urban schools, they are qualitatively different. We cannot look at all schools in Nebraska through a single facet of the prism and attempt the same structure on all of them. Finally, we need to think in terms

of educational standards not educational standardization. There is no reason for educators to assume that larger school units have higher quality educational standards or that smaller schools are inherently poorer schools. Quality should be demanded of all Nebraska schools with the recognition that there is more than one way to achieve educational quality.

On behalf of the **Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association**, we urge the readers of this study to begin to develop a new conception of rural education in the state. The time has come to abandon our old views and acquire new ones. We believe that Class Dismissed: Examining Nebraska's Rural Education Debate is an important first step.

The NRCSA Executive Committee,

Richard Finley, President
Jim Havelka, President Elect
Duane Stehlik, Past President
Gary E. Fisher, Secretary-Treasurer
Russell Hoppner, Eastern District Representative
Bob Reed, Central District Representative
Bob Mandeville, Eastern District Representative

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INTRODUCTION

Viewed from afar, Nebraska seems like a state that has solved the educational riddles baffling the rest of the nation.

Nebraska has a better record of retaining students through high school graduation than 48 other states. Only one other state in the nation has a higher percentage of graduates who aspire to higher education -- and therefore, choose to take the ACT or SAT college entrance examinations. And, even given a far broader spectrum of students taking these national exams, the high scores of Nebraska's graduates rank them among the top five states in America. In other words, Nebraska seems to have unlocked the secret of how to motivate students to stay in school through graduation, to aspire to continue their education after high school, and to perform very well on the national academic achievement and aptitude tests.[1]

Yet, this is only the beginning of Nebraska's "educational magic". Consider the fact that these good results were attained in a state having teachers who are dramatically less well-credentialed than their counterparts elsewhere. Then, consider that Nebraska is far from a wealthy state; in fact, it ranks below the national average in terms of per capita income and income supporting each pupil. Next, consider that the Nebraska state legislature spends fewer dollars per pupil and pays a smaller proportion of the total schooling bill than all but a handful of states. And finally, consider that Nebraska's fine educational outcomes occur in a state ranking 35th on overall per pupil expenditures -- spending 14% below the national average ! [2]

It's a *very* impressive record, inspiring inquiries about how such an enviable balance of high performance and high efficiency was attained -- and about how this Nebraska "educational magic" might be reproduced all around the country.

The irony is that, viewed from *within* the state, Nebraska education seems to be in trouble, in turmoil and in transition toward an uncertain future. Far from projecting the aura of celebration and the boundless optimism an outsider might expect from such a successful state, the state's education community appears to be both embattled and embittered.

Nebraska has a fine education system, but, tragically, there is "bad blood" among the various educators, state officials, legislators and interest groups entrusted with the continuing operation and improvement of this system.

How could something so right be so wrong? This was the question haunting me as I delved into the written record of the state-level battles over education being waged in Nebraska. Why were so many people so upset about school-related issues in a state where, from the outside, it appeared there were ample reasons to be proud and happy?

I had been asked by the leaders of the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA) to prepare a brief study on the current status and future prospects of K-12 rural school systems in the Cornhusker state. The invitation came as a bit of a surprise. These units did not seem in dire need of a "white knight" riding in to rescue them (even if I had been capable of playing this role). In fact, these systems did not appear to be under much of an assault from *any* "enemy".

I also was surprised because I knew my writings on rural education (such as Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom, or Heavy Meddle) had sparked controversy in Nebraska over the years.[3] From my perspective, both sides in the debate had misused my work.

Those who *agreed* with my work pretended that it had been written with Nebraska specifically in mind -- and thus, fit their situation perfectly. This was not the case. At the same time, those who *disagreed* with the findings of my research pretended that the evidence gathered from across the nation (and around the world), as well as the logic of the arguments presented, had nothing whatsoever to do with Nebraska -- and thus, could be dismissed out of hand. This also was just plain wrong. There seems to have been much more interest in using -- or defusing -- my research as a weapon, than in actually paying attention to its lessons for Nebraska.

Given this history, the biggest surprise was to discover that there was a new group -- the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association -- that had major interests beyond the single issue of reorganization. In my contacts with this organization, I consistently have been impressed by the quality of their leadership and, especially, by their commitment to creating a positive, forward-looking agenda for the the state's rural schools. The assignment they asked me to accept was both difficult and intriguing.

There was neither time, nor money available for me to conduct original statewide research in Nebraska (although there is a pressing need for such research). Similarly, it was not feasible to develop a series of case studies on a representative cross-section of rural schools. And, for a variety of reasons, it seemed pointless to prepare a detailed analysis of the merits of dozens of past and present legislative proposals.

Instead, I was asked to carefully review the existing data, claims and counter-claims, reports, proposals and anecdotes that shape the "Rural Education Debate" in Nebraska; to compare these with what had been learned through similar explorations and debates outside Nebraska; and to prepare a report that would both address the state-level educational stalemate caused by this debate, and offer suggestions as to how Nebraska might be able to start moving forward once again.

More specifically, the leaders of NRCSA asked me to focus on the situation of the state's rural K-12 education systems. The wisdom of this emphasis became increasingly apparent as my investigation progressed.

First, it seems unlikely that Nebraska's 600+ Class I (elementary only) and Class VI (secondary only) school districts still will exist as independent units by the dawn of the new millennium. This is not a judgment about their merits or faults, nor about the virtues and vices of such reorganizations.

Rather, this prediction reflects a purely political assessment. The fact of the matter is that the reorganization controversy has poisoned the well of Nebraska education so deeply that a dramatic purging will be required to cleanse the whole system.

The shift in Nebraska's political and economic power base toward urban areas only reinforces the likelihood that this purge will take place at the expense of the Class I and VI school districts (although not necessarily to the detriment of all their students). Thus, today's Class I and VI districts will be constituent members of tomorrow's rural K-12 school systems.

The second reason why NRCSA's focus on the rural K-12 districts makes sense can be found in the fact that these systems are <u>not</u> under heavy, direct assault at the moment. Away from the intensity of a pitched battle -- and having not yet been painted into a political corner -- there is still an

opportunity for all relevant parties to rationally consider what directions *should* be pursued by Nebraska's rural K-12 districts.

NRCSA's concern about the future of the rural education in Nebraska (even in a post-Class I and VI era) is well-founded. The same forces that appear to have doomed the Class I and VI units could be marshalled next against a large portion of the rural K-12 systems. Equally harmful, if these K-12 units feel compelled to spend their time and energy defeating further reorganization and centralization campaigns, then they will be less able to concentrate on making needed substantive improvements.

Therefore, the underlying hope is that this report will contribute to NRCSA's larger effort to simultaneously *preserve and improve* Nebraska's rural schools. They recognize that mere survival is not good enough; they also must be actively engaged in the process of educational renewal. Yet, they know that these positive developments can only occur in an atmosphere free from persistent political pressures, negative interventions and threats to their survival from the state level.

In the pages that follow, I have tried to do justice to this assignment. However, even after doing a considerable amount of homework for this report, I make no claim to being an expert on Nebraska education -- nor would I claim that I now know THE ANSWERS to questions about schooling in the Cornhusker state. Deep down, I don't believe anyone else has all the answers either. One would hope this would provoke more humility and more flexibility all around-- and less of the rigidity and the true believer mentality that has created so much "bad blood" in such a good state.

While this is not the report a native Nebraskan might have written, perhaps it benefits from being prepared by an interested observer with no emotional, financial, professional or political stake in the outcome of the current controversies. Sometimes an outsider can bring a fresh perspective to the discussion of key public issues -- and thereby, assist the people most directly involved to consider old problems in a new light.

One final introductory note. Those readers looking for a fiery condemnation of any particular group of state officials, legislators, lobbyists or educators will be disappointed by my report. There already is more than enough overheated rhetoric present in the "Rural Education Debate". The resulting political divisiveness and personal animosities serve no constructive

purpose for Nebraska's children, schools or communities.

Assigning blame for past mistakes should not be a priority. More important is the fact that *Nebraska's status as a leading education state is in jeopardy.* The quality of education Nebraska has enjoyed compared to other states will not continue automatically. The combination of major improvements elsewhere and educational stagnation in Nebraska could relegate the Cornhusker state to relative mediocrity almost overnight.

This is not a result most Nebraskans desire, nor one they will graciously accept. Rather, my firm impression is that the overwhelming majority of Nebraskans genuinely care about educational quality, fairness and efficiency. If this report encourages Cornhuskers to pull together toward common goals for the state's schools (rather than continuing to pull the educational system apart), then it will have served its purpose well.

THE FACTUAL SIDE OF THE "RURAL EDUCATION DEBATE"

While there is a torrent of opinion from every side about the "Rural Education Debate", useful facts about Nebraska education are like usable water in the desert -- a precious commodity in *very* short supply.

Educational policy here has been shaped by a volatile combination of ideology and anecdote to a far greater extent than by empirical evidence and sound analysis. Discussions about the quality of rural high schools almost invariably end up being reduced to swapping *stories* about their flaws and virtues. Proponents of small rural schools brag about how well Sarah Smith did at the University (or about how Tommy Jones is now a respected surgeon), while their opponents tell heart-rending tales (often autobiographical) about sixteen year olds in the countryside being denied a course in calculus or the opportunity to learn advanced Spanish.

There are a variety of problems with government by anecdote. Even granting that everybody's tale is basically true as told, these stories portray a very selective slice of life that may not accurately reflect the whole. This concern about generalizability is compounded by the time factor. The anecdotes one routinely hears (and which are thought to be important in the current debate) span a time period from sixty *minutes* to sixty *years* ago. How applicable they really are to what is broadly true today across Nebraska is anyone's guess.

Stories are very helpful and powerful public policy tools -- when used to illustrate the nuances of a situation, or the human complexities behind aggregate statistics. They can bring deeper meaning to the "cold, hard facts" of any educational issue. However, anecdotes are not a legitimate *substitute* for the facts themselves. Without an appropriate context in which to place these tales, "So what?", becomes the most legitimate response.

What other response to them is reasonable? Are we supposed to believe that all children from small rural high schools go on to attend the University, do well while there, and then accomplish great things in various professions? No one would seriously make such a claim, just as no one would argue that the students from these schools *never* succeed in the larger world. Conversely, are we supposed to believe that unequal opportunities, educational stagnation and poor schooling experiences are

absent from large urban schools? No one knowledgeable about the realities of city schools could make such an assertion with a straight face either. What the tellers of these tales would like us to believe is that they're citing examples of the ordinary -- that is, merely describing a characteristic (or an outcome) that is *typical* not only of that particular place and time, but also of all places in the same broad category today. Maybe they're right on target. But, in the absence of reliable statewide data, it is equally plausible that they are doing nothing more than fleshing out their own prejudices and engaging in wishful thinking about what they would *like* to be typical and true about urban and rural schools throughout Nebraska.

Before trying to move beyond the anecdotal and into the realm of the factual, two definitions are in order here. The first is for "rural" and the second is for "small".

There is no accepted *national* definition of a "rural" school or district . Even the U.S. Census Bureau definition of a rural *area* is a residual one -- that is, they carefully define various types of "urban" and "metropolitan" areas, and then declare whatever is left over to be "rural" or "non-metropolitan". Thus, rural schools could be seen as those physically located in rural (or non-metropolitan) areas, or as those serving only (or mostly) children who reside in such areas. One also could create definitions based on the density of population in an area, or the distance from a major metropolitan area. [4]

Rigid definitions are largely pointless. Definitions that serve mainly to exaggerate differences, rather than to help people find some common ground, are worse than pointless.

Thus, this report uses a very inclusive (rather than exclusive) conception of "rural" -- that is, any school or school district drawing the majority of its students from beyond the boundaries of either a metropolitan area or a town of more than 5,000 residents. This is nothing more than a "rule of thumb", with *self-identification* taking precedence. Thus, if the people connected with schools near the upper end of this scale identify more with urban school systems, then what is the point of labeling them as "rural"?

Similarly, a very inclusive conception of "small" is used here -- that is, any K-12 school system having a total membership of less than 1,000 and a high school (9-12) membership under 300. Again, this (like everyone else's definition) is nothing more than an arbitrary rule of thumb that should be

put aside if it conflicts with the self-identification of school systems. Thus, if the people in Chadron consider their school system (which does not meet these criteria) to be a "small" one, then they should consider themselves included here. Conversely, if the people in Broken Bow believe their school system (which does meet the criteria) is wrongly placed in the "small" category, then they are free to reject this label.

Any common sense division of the state's K-12 school districts along the urban-rural spectrum, or along the large-small continuum, is going to reveal the same basic reality. Nebraska's education system now has -- and always will have -- far more small rural districts (and schools) than large urban ones. The point of making such an obvious statement is to remind readers that no matter what the outcome may be of the current battles over reorganization, Nebraska will continue to be a sparsely-populated state with few urban centers and many dispersed rural communities.

Therefore, whatever the fate of the Class I and VI systems, the majority of Nebraska's school districts will continue to be both small and rural. These systems will enroll only a minority of the state's students. This already is the case. Even using the inclusive definitions noted earlier, no more than one-third of Nebraska's public school students could be classified as being part of a small rural school system. Still, this percentage is far greater than the 5% figure occasionally used by state officials to dismiss this sector of Nebraska's education system as marginal and insignificant.

Small rural schools and school systems are here to stay -- and will continue to be an important component of Nebraska education. What do we know about such systems? How can we assess their quality, cost and efficiency?

Sizing Up the Issue of Quality

To an outsider, two aspects of the Nebraska debate about quality of education are striking. First, nearly everyone assumes enrollment size and educational quality are very closely related. The disagreements are about whether this presumed size/quality relationship is a *positive* or a *negative* one. All parties have become adept at creating elaborate rationales for why "bigness", or "smallness", or "optimum size" is the key to educational quality in both schools and school districts.

Second, despite (or perhaps, *because* of) the depth of feeling about the

importance of the size/quality nexus, there has been remarkably little done to resolve this matter through appropriate and reliable statewide evaluations of education. The data base for measuring the size/quality relationship, and for making accurate comparisons across Nebraska, is virtually non-existent. For example, while nearly all Nebraska students take standardized achievement tests during their school careers, the *results* of these tests are neither collected, nor compared, statewide.

How is it possible for reasonable people to hold such divergent views about the nature of the relationship between size and quality in the educational arena? The absence of "hard" data and the reliance on anecdotal evidence help to explain this situation. However, the controversy is also a result of major differences in what is meant by "educational quality". The differing conceptions of what constitutes a "good" school (or school district) begin to reveal why size is seen as an important factor by all parties here.

Looking at Inputs

The traditional way of evaluating schools is to focus on the "input" side. Thus, a good school is seen as one that has a first-rate physical plant, an ample supply of books, materials and equipment, highly-credentialed teachers, a variety of specialist staff members, and a strong breadth and depth of course offerings.

This way of thinking about what constitutes quality has been formalized across the education world, most powerfully through state accreditation standards. Nebraska, unlike most other states, has developed a complex, tri-level system of rating schools and school systems as being "approved" (for the minimally acceptable), "accredited" (for the vast majority of K-12 units) or "AA classified" (for the ostensible *creme de la creme)* . The input orientation of these standards is apparent in such detailed specifications as those found in Nebraska's Title 92, Chapter 15, Section 006.03F accreditation regulations:[5]

> *The library-media center shall have file cabinet(s) for the vertical files. The vertical files shall contain a selection of at least 200 main headings of general information such as described in the Sears List of Subject Headings, H.W. Wilson Company .*

The kinds of input specifications that relate to the physical environment

and to the material endowment of schools represent desirable resources for students. Who would argue that a modest old facility is better than a flashy new building, or that a rudimentary library is better than a really well-stocked one? If money was no object, it would be hard to imagine a community *not* wanting to have its children in the best school facilities with the most fulsome array of learning resources. However, money is a constraint and only the wealthiest small rural systems are in a position to rival the physical and material endowments of larger urban schools.

If one believes that having fancy school buildings with lots of good "stuff" inside them equals a "quality education", then one would have to side with the folks arguing that "bigger is better". However, is there any demonstrable basis for this belief? While these resources may be *desirable*, are they *essential* in educational terms?

Based on the past two decades of educational research, the answer to both questions is a resounding NO ! There is not a single reliable, controlled study done in Nebraska, or elsewhere, proving that such resources contribute in any important way to student academic achievement (or other key educational outcomes).

On the contrary, the literature is overflowing with studies showing that compared with such factors as native intelligence and family background, the "stuff" with which we surround students has only a miniscule impact on what, or how well, they achieve during their school careers.[6]

Put more concretely, there is not a whit of evidence supporting the *educational* value of such accreditation criteria as Section 006.03F. Thus, schools which refrain from using "vertical files" (or the matching file cabinets), which have only 150 main headings instead of 200, or which organize information using a system other than that found in the Sears List, cannot properly be viewed as having short-changed their students -- or as having placed them in any educational jeopardy.

So, while small rural schools often have a hard time competing on the physical side of the input ledger, there is absolutely *no* justification for censuring them on this basis. Better buildings and better "stuff" are desirable to the extent they create a more pleasant environment for students and teachers alike. However, just as it is foolish to judge a book by its cover (or by the quality of its ink and paper), so too, it is unwise to

directly equate good physical resources with good educational results.

The immediate reply to this line of reasoning is that "good stuff" may not really matter, but good teachers are vital. Surely, this is an input to the education system that really *does* matter. On this point, there is widespread agreement all along the spectrum of Nebraska's citizens, professionals and politicians. And indeed, the literature confirms the empirical observation that there is a clear connection between teacher quality and overall educational quality.

The difficulty comes with how to accurately *measure and compare* this particular input across Nebraska's schools. Since there is no standardized rating system for teachers, how do we know what the actual distribution of teaching quality might be across the state's school systems? Is there *any* correlation between school size and teacher quality in Nebraska?

The truth is that nobody knows the answer to those questions. Some researchers have tried to use various proxies for teacher quality such as years of experience, professional degrees earned, subject matter endorsements (i.e., certification) and even salary level. At best, however, these are unreliable indicators of actual teaching prowess. Common sense (and our common experience with teachers) suggests that there is not an automatic connection between these proxies for teacher quality and the "real McCoy". Good teachers can be highly-experienced (or not), highly-credentialed (or not), and relatively highly-paid (or not). Unfortunately, the same nebulous statement applies to bad teachers, too.

In fact, Nebraska's situation demonstrates the weakness of these proxies. If one was to take academic credentials as a serious measure of teaching ability, then Nebraska's teachers would appear to be in terrible shape. For example, in 1986, 51.4% of America's public school teachers had at least a master's degree, while only 24.6% of Nebraska's teachers had comparable graduate degrees.[7] Thus, Nebraska's teachers rank among the lowest in the nation on this "indicator of quality".

According to this proxy, children in virtually every other state had better teachers than those in Nebraska. Yet, everyone "knows in their heart" that Nebraska has been blessed with *at least* as high a proportion of good teachers as other states. Indeed, Nebraskans are proud of the quality of their teaching force -- and the scandalous reports about semi-literate

teachers elsewhere in America do not resonate in the Nebraska experience. So, what's going on here?

Evidently, Nebraska's teacher education colleges have not been as successful as those in other states in convincing the Legislature to link recertification with continuing coursework toward graduate degrees. Clearly, the financial incentives offered by Nebraska's school districts have not been sufficient to induce most teachers to acquire graduate degrees.

Looking within Nebraska, the same nagging concerns about the real meaning of such proxies persists. For example, at approximately 31% each, the Omaha and Lincoln schools have a greater proportion of teachers with master's degrees than do the Class II and III districts as a whole.[8]

However, this percentage still places Omaha and Lincoln far below the national average.[9] And, even though their teachers have far easier access to university graduate programs, Omaha and Lincoln both are surpassed on this measure by such small rural systems as Loomis, Eustis, Wakefield, Oakland Craig, Gibbon, and Centennial.[10] The question is : "So what?".

Not even the most gung-ho advocate would contend that any particular size or type of school system has cornered the market on top-quality teachers. Urban schools are able to attract good teachers who are interested in the higher pay, more specialized assignments and diverse opportunities (personal and professional) that tend to be present in the cities and larger towns. Rural schools are able to attract good teachers who prefer country living, generalist roles, and the close-knit communities (both within and beyond the school) that tend to exist in small towns and rural areas.

In the absence of any hard data to the contrary, one must assume that Nebraska's teaching talent is fairly broadly distributed across the state. There certainly is no evidence indicating that small rural schools have a lower proportion of this input, nor that rural student achievement has suffered as a result of any differences that may exist. These realities should serve as a reminder that if teacher quality is a concern, the best way to address it is *head-on* -- for instance, through improving teacher training and professional development programs. Making schools (or school systems) bigger is a remarkably clumsy, indirect, unproven and probably futile strategy for raising teacher quality.

The final input argument made by the advocates of larger schools is in the area of curriculum. They assert that as school enrollments increase, there is an opportunity to make the curriculum both broader and deeper. They point out that there is no way that a high school with fifty students can offer the same number of courses as one with five hundred enrolled. On both counts, they are absolutely right.

However, equating curricular offerings and quality education is trickier than it might seem. When advocates start making claims that a high school offering eighty courses is *inherently better* than one offering "only" forty courses, they suddenly find themselves on very thin ice, in terms of what can be supported by either existing research or common sense.

It is wrong to assume that quantity automatically equals quality. For instance, a curriculum jam-packed with options makes it easy for students to avoid taking a solid, well-rounded core of courses.[11] At one end of the spectrum, a deep curriculum allows students to over-specialize too early in their lives and academic careers. At the other end, a broad curriculum allows students to skate along the surface taking lots of introductory courses and avoiding learning any subject at a more than superficial level. Neither of these predictable side-effects of curricular *quantity* end up producing the kind of curricular *quality* we would like for all students.

Before proceeding too far in the direction of expanding the curriculum, it is worth heeding the criticisms expressed by both business leaders and university professors around the country. Business groups have adopted the position that they are <u>not</u> looking to high schools to train their workers for them. Rather, they want to hire graduates with a good basic education, good work habits and a good attitude toward learning.

Similarly, some university professors complain about the "mis-education" high school students have received from teachers who were not properly prepared (even if officially "endorsed") to teach advanced or specialized courses -- and the amount of subsequent "unlearning" of wrong information these students must do at the university.

In such areas as advanced mathematics, science and foreign languages, there are critical shortages of genuinely competent high school teachers. Requiring more high schools to offer more of these advanced courses looks,

on paper, like a big step in the direction of strengthening the quality of high school education. In reality, however, it may have the opposite effect.

French teachers who are not fluent in French, advanced science and math teachers who have only minimal training and experience (and haven't had the time, assistance or inclination to keep up with these changing fields), or psychology teachers who are heavily dependent upon a watered-down textbook and some handouts from a week-long summer workshop, are not people who inspire much confidence about the *real* worth of the tougher curriculum high schools feel a pressure to adopt. Many university professors say they would rather teach students with *no* background in calculus than ones with a poor background in it

The point is simply that schools offering lots of impressive-sounding courses do not always have the staff to deliver equally impressive results. Until such time as there is either a dramatic increase in the number of top-quality advanced/specialist teachers (including many who are willing to relocate to rural areas) or an alternative means of instruction available (a topic dealt with later in this report), it probably is educationally counter-productive to celebrate, and push for, a jumbo-size curriculum.

Moderation here, as in most things, is what's needed. Without a doubt, there are small rural high schools that need to beef up and expand the minimal course offerings currently available. At the same time, there are larger urban schools that need to pare down their course lists in the interests of quality control.

One of the often overlooked aspects of this debate is that the state's small rural schools receive a good deal of valuable curricular/teaching support from the network of Educational Service Units (ESUs). The instructional services provided through these units, and other cooperative sharing arrangements, are not counted in the tally of each school's array of learning resources and educational opportunities available to students. When the contributions of the ESUs are remembered, it makes the case for the educational integrity of small rural schools even stronger.

The goal ought to be to enable students everywhere in Nebraska to receive high quality instruction in a core group of courses deemed to be an essential part of any student's education. There is widespread support in Nebraska, and nationwide, for the idea of *core courses* that every high

school should offer -- although there continue to be disagreements about exactly which courses should be included and excluded.

In fact, this search for a reasonable set of core courses is one of the hallmarks of the current educational reform movement nationwide. It is fascinating to see both conservative documents (from U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett's ideal curriculum for "James Madison High School", to Mortimer Adler's Paideia Proposal) and liberal reports (from Theodore Sizer's Horace's Compromise , to The Shopping Mall High School by Powell et al.) all united by their call for a narrower, more unified and focused curriculum.[12]

Although they (and the other major reform leaders) differ considerably on the specific content, no one is advocating the idea that more courses, more options, more tracks and more of a "cafeteria" approach to curriculum will enhance educational quality.

This emerging national consensus on the need for a leaner, stronger curriculum has important implications for the "Rural Education Debate" in Nebraska. It means that small rural high schools , in particular, can no longer be complacent about the "gaps" in their ability to provide students with first-rate instruction in *all* essential areas.

Most important, however, this trend in educational reform should give small rural schools a new lease on life and a renewed sense of their own capacity for educational excellence. In an era when people really believed that a high school with eighty courses must be at least twice as good as one with "only" forty courses, the small rural schools seemed tremendously handicapped by their size and resources. They could never "keep up with the Jones" in terms of the number, or diversity, of the courses offered. Now, however, the jumbo-size curriculum is beginning to look like a White Elephant -- and more like a liability than an asset in the quest for quality.

Small, rural schools should thrive in an era that honors a limited, focused, well-rounded curriculum (whatever the results of the debate about the specific content may be). When a premium is placed on doing a few things well, rather than trying to be all things to all people, small rural schools are in a position to compete successfully with larger systems -- and to excel.

The bottom line on the relationship between educational inputs and

educational quality in Nebraska is that the state's small rural K-12 systems come out looking much better than the conventional wisdom would lead one to expect.

While most small rural schools cannot match the physical facilities and material resources of larger, more urban institutions, the research indicates that (beyond the minimum health, safety and comfort requirements) all this "stuff" has no discernible impact on the quality of education received by students, nor on their later academic achievement.

Teachers *are* important, but there is every reason to believe that small rural systems have been able to attract and retain their fair share of the state's good teachers. There certainly is no evidence revealing that rural schools are bereft of teaching talent.

Finding first-rate advanced/specialist teachers in such areas as math, science and foreign language has been a struggle for many small rural schools. However, this problem is amenable to solution by eliminating inappropriately specialized courses from the curriculum; devising alternative methods by which students can acquire needed competencies in key subjects; increasing the supply of competent teachers in shortage areas; and/or relying on shared services and teachers through the ESUs.

Consolidating entire schools (and school districts) in order to provide quality courses in calculus, inorganic chemistry and advanced Spanish seems an incredibly inefficient, uncreative and wrenching method of solving a teacher supply/instructional delivery problem.

The final input -- curriculum -- points out the improving prospects of small, rural schools. As our nation's educational leaders move away from the blind faith that "bigger is better" and toward a vision of a coherent, focused curriculum emphasizing a core of essential courses, the small rural schools should be able to perform as well as their larger, urban counterparts. Once again, it is worth pointing out that although large schools always have offered more courses than small ones, there is no solid, reliable research establishing a cause and effect relationship between the number of high school courses and the educational attainment (or achievement) of high school students in Nebraska -- or anywhere else.

The evidence reveals that once a basic floor has been established, these

inputs, in and of themselves, do not have a significant effect on student performance and other educational outcomes. They are not even in the same league as native intelligence and family background as predictors of academic aspirations, motivation and achievement.

Looking at "Through-Puts"

As it dawned on educators that inputs were *not* the keys to educational quality, they began an intensive search for the most significant through-puts -- that is, the environmental and process factors that promote educational excellence. The underlying theory is simply that: what resources schools <u>have</u> are less important than what schools actually <u>do</u> with whatever resources they may possess. Accordingly, the emphasis in educational research and educational policy has shifted from the tangible characteristics of schools and school districts to the more intangible behaviors and "climate" found within these units.

As is the case in the national quest for the best combination of courses in the ideal core curriculum, there is not yet a consensus on the exact mix of attributes that result in a high quality education. However, the research has progressed to the point where a fairly consistent set of themes can be identified. The remaining differences are variations on these themes.

From the work of such notable educator/researchers as Ron Edmonds, John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, Sara Lightfoot and Michael Rutter, the consistent elements of educational excellence revolve around such interpersonal and institutional factors as: 1) strong, positive leadership; 2) high expectations of student and teacher achievement; 3) respectful relationships among students, teachers and administrators; 4) individualized instruction and attention; 5) an emphasis on the academic basics; 6) parental/community involvement and support; 7) fair and frequent feedback to both students and teachers on their performance (emphasizing positive reinforcement of success and progress); 8) a friendly, but businesslike, classroom and school climate; 9) a healthy balance of activities fostering the intellectual, physical, emotional and social development of students; and 10) a tolerance for individual initiatives and for trying new approaches to learning.[13]

The implications of the "effective schools" research and the "schools of excellence" movement for Nebraska's "Rural Education Debate" are profound. The most important implication is that the state's small rural

K-12 districts legitimately can be expected to meet these ten criteria.

None of these elements of excellence are beyond the reach of Nebraska's small rural schools. The kind of behavior and environmental factors identified as being crucial to educational quality are not dependent upon schools of any particular size or geographic locale.

In fact, a strong case could be made that Nebraska's small rural schools have certain advantages over larger, metropolitan schools in the development and refinement of these attributes. Items such as "parental/community involvement and support" already are characteristic of most of Nebraska's small rural schools. Similarly the traditional emphases in small rural schools on the academic basics and on a friendly, but businesslike, climate give these schools an important head start.

The criterion of "individualized instruction and attention" is a prime example of the positive linkage between the common attributes of small rural schools and the hallmarks of top-quality schools. There is a powerful organizational feature of small rural schools that gives them a clear advantage in this area over larger, more urban schools. That feature is their low pupil/teacher ratio.

The Omaha Public Schools have an average of one teacher per every 20.6 elementary pupils and one per every 16.7 secondary students. The Lincoln Public Schools ratios are 17.1 (elementary) and an identical 16.7 (secondary).[14] While these are slightly lower than the ratios in many other urban school systems across the nation, they do not approach the low pupil/teacher ratios in Nebraska's small rural K-12 school systems.[15]

For example, there are 72 rural K-12 school districts in Nebraska having a secondary level pupil/teacher ratio <u>at least 50% lower</u> than in Omaha and Lincoln. In other words, in these 72 rural secondary schools, there were less than 8.3 students for every full-time teacher!). While less dramatic at the elementary level, the basic pattern of small rural K-12 systems having far lower pupil teacher ratios than either Omaha or Lincoln held firm for younger students as well.[16] It does not take much imagination to understand the impact of these staffing patterns on a school's ability to effectively *implement* a program of individualized instruction.

Despite these inherent advantages, small rural schools (like larger, more

urban ones) must make a concerted effort if they are to live up to all ten of these qualitative criteria. While not disadvantaged, small rural schools do not have any natural advantages in such categories as "strong, positive leadership". Moreover, Nebraska's small rural systems must pay particular attention to the crucial area of "high expectations of student and teacher achievement". Too often, the people in these schools have exhibited a curious mixture of complacency and low self-esteem. In some schools, this has resulted in an unwillingness on the part of students, teachers, parents and administrators to strive hard to reach their full potential. The tendency to settle for less than their very best must be counteracted, if small rural schools are to demonstrate their capacity to deliver educational excellence.

Still, the bottom line on these so-called through-puts is a very heartening one for Nebraska's small rural K-12 systems. National and international research (on schools of all types and sizes) reveals that there are some common denominators within the school setting that make a significant difference in educational quality and student outcomes. The good news is that every single one of these key factors is readily attainable by small rural schools -- without consolidation, without a major infusion of new money and without having to wait for any new technologies.

All of the information presented thus far relates to the classroom setting and the academic program. However, a large part of the school experience, especially at the secondary level, revolves around extra-curricular activities. Students and community members, in particular, perceive extra-curricular activities to be inextricably linked with the quality of education. In other words, they believe that part of what makes a school "good" is the strength of its non-academic programs and opportunities.

A strong case can be made that important learning and essential aspects of student development results from direct participation in school activities, as well as from formal classroom instruction. The key phrase here is *direct participation* . Passive, spectator roles do not offer the same educational and developmental benefits as active, participant roles. The student who plays in the band has a different, and far richer, experience than the one whose only contact with the band is hearing it at halftime.

This distinction is vital in understanding one of the key attributes of small rural schools. While there are fewer choices in small schools than in large ones (and fewer in rural communities than in urban ones), a greater

proportion of rural students take full advantage of existing opportunities.

This pattern can be found on the curricular side. For example, a 1986 university study of rural high schools in seven states (including Nebraska) found that as enrollment size *increased* , the percentage of students actually taking such courses as chemistry/physics or business management *decreased* .[17] In fact, as the study's authors state: "When a significant relationship was found [between enrollment size and the percentage of students taking selected specialized courses], it favors schools with smaller enrollments". [18]

However, the same pattern is even more apparent on the extra-curricular side. A classic study done in Kansas high schools ranging in size from 35 to 2,287 students (and confirmed elsewhere in more recent years) makes a compelling case about the greater degree to which small rural schools elicit the direct and active participation of students in school activities.[19]

These researchers found that the proportion of students actively involved in extra-curricular activities: "reached a peak in high schools with enrollments between 61 and 150. The proportion of participants was 3 to 20 times greater in the small schools as in the largest school. The average number of extracurricular activities and kinds of activities in which students engaged during their four-year high school careers was twice as great in the small as in the large schools." [20] These, and a host of similar findings, lead the authors to conclude that:[21]

> The educational process is a subtle and delicate thing about which we know little, but it surely thrives on participation, enthusiasm and responsibility. Our findings and our theory posit a negative relationship between school size and individual student participation. What seems to happen is as schools get larger and settings inevitably become more heavily populated, more of the students are less needed; they become superfluous, redundant ... The data of this research tell us that a school should be small enough that students are needed and are not redundant.

Looking at Outputs

Some people grow impatient with how much educators focus on inputs and on the internal processes and dynamics of schooling (through-puts). To them, "the proof is in the pudding" and the only measures worth worrying about are those that directly speak to results.

The problem here is that there is virtually no data on student outcomes in Nebraska. If ignorance is bliss, Nebraskans should feel positively ecstatic about what is known about the educational performance of their children.

State accreditation standards are not based upon *any* measures of how well schools are actually doing academically -- compared to each other, to schools anywhere else, or to national norms for standardized tests. The Nebraska Department of Education does not collect any student achievement or performance data, nor does it have any solid basis for making informed judgments about the *results* attained by schools of any size or description.

Interestingly, Nebraska's colleges and universities have refrained from conducting independent research on this topic, while the statewide education associations have not succeeded in gathering useful information from their own members about this seemingly vital concern.[22]

In the face of this deafening silence, there is no real alternative other than to try to piece together the few bits of output data about Nebraska that do exist. Let's begin with some data about the "holding power" of schools.

This refers to the whole area of school dropouts -- in other words, how good are different types of schools at motivating students to stay enrolled and to end up with their high school diploma? Although the reasons why students leave prior to graduation can be complex (and not always directly related to the quality of the school) it is obvious that *students who are not even enrolled cannot possibly be receiving a quality education there* .

Looking inside Nebraska, one sees that in 1986-87, the Omaha Public Schools had a secondary level (7-12) membership of 18,154 students in September. During that one school year, 1,398 of these students "voted with their feet" by officially dropping out.

Although an annual dropout rate of 7.7% is not alarming by national standards, it is very high in the context of Nebraska. The Lincoln Public Schools had a much more nationally acceptable annual dropout rate of 4.0%. However, even in Lincoln, this translated into 447 young people in one year who decided to quit school.[23]

With a combined 7-12 membership of 29,399 students, Omaha and Lincoln accounted for 26% of all the 112,690 secondary level students enrolled in public, K-12 school systems across the state. However, these two school systems accounted for 52% of all the dropouts in Nebraska's K-12 districts. In other words, more students in the two largest school districts dropped out last year than in all the other 279 K-12 districts *combined* .[24]

By contrast, there were 93 small rural K-12 systems which had no (zero !) dropouts at all last year. In fact, Nebraska can boast of fifteen entire *counties* (all rural) in which no secondary students dropped out during 1986-87. The Class II school districts (all of which are small rural K-12 systems) have a record that is nothing short of phenomenal in this regard. Last year, the Class II systems had only 31 dropouts among them -- an annual dropout rate well under 1%. [25]

Graduation rates are the flip side of the dropout rates. To find the latest graduation rate, the Nebraska Department of Education compared the 9th grade membership of each high school in 1983-84 with number of actual graduates from each school in 1986-87.[26] This rate shows the ability of schools to motivate, and meet the needs of, *all* their students -- at least to the point at which these young people decide it is worthwhile to finish high school. Graduation rates indicate the priority students place on staying in school once the legal compulsion to do so has ended.

Nebraska ranked second in the nation in terms of graduation rates, with 87% of its 9th graders eventually making it all the way through high school. This compares very favorably with the national average of 71% and comes very close to meeting President Reagan's announced Challenge Goal of a 90% graduation rate in each state.[27]

Although both exceeded the national average, Omaha (73%) and Lincoln (84%) each fell short of the statewide average on graduation rates. Small rural schools had both the best and the worst individual rates, reflecting the fact that very few actual students can make a big percentage difference

in a small unit. However, despite these fluctuations, even the Class II districts (i.e., the smallest rural K-12 systems) registered an average 93% graduation rate in 1986-87. [28]

These dropout and graduation rate data certainly don't *prove* that the smaller country schools are "better" than those found in Omaha or Lincoln. However, it does persuasively demonstrate that, for whatever reasons, these little K-12 systems did have much greater holding power than their metropolitan counterparts. It also means that a far greater proportion of rural students decided, for whatever reasons, to stay in their small schools and take advantage of what it had to offer.

Finally, it's important to remember the human consequences of these statistics. For all its many virtues, the fact remains that the Omaha Public Schools "lost" *more than one out of every four* of its students prior to graduation last year -- while small rural high schools lost *fewer than one out of every ten*.[29]

The 831 young people missing from Omaha's graduating Class of 1987 face a predictably difficult and unhappy future as high school dropouts. What does it say about student perceptions of the quality of education available when 27% of these *consumers* of schooling choose to face those predictable difficulties, rather than to stay and graduate?

Given a fairly random distribution of native intelligence (and the fact that per capita income is higher in the metropolitan areas of Nebraska), one might expect that greater holding power would result in lower average academic achievement among small rural schools. After all, there aren't many straight A students (or kids from wealthy families) dropping out of school in Nebraska these days.

Think about it. Since rural schools hang onto almost every student who walks in the door -- instead of having their most difficult and unsuccessful students conveniently disappear (drop out) -- it would be logical to expect the less able rural students to drag down their school's average test scores. This probable deficit is compounded by the fact that small rural schools often do not offer the kinds of advanced courses taught by specialist teachers that should help produce higher scores on such college entrance exams as the ACT. And, just to add to the likely drags on small school testing averages, it turns out that a significantly higher percentage of their

graduates actually take the ACT each year than is the case for graduates of the larger urban public high schools. For example, while 68% of Nebraska's 1987 graduates took the ACT, the proportions in the Omaha and Lincoln public schools were only 53% and 62% respectively.[30]

In other words, when you consider the fact that the graduates from small rural schools represent a lower income, less "elite", less "well-prepared" group than the young people taking the ACT from the larger schools, it looks like the deck is stacked against these country kids.

But then, one sees the actual results. Consider, for example, the distribution of ACT scores among the freshman class that entered the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the autumn of 1985 (the most recent year for which these data are available).

Amazingly, they reveal that the highest average ACT scores were attained by graduates of the three smallest groups of schools. The 282 freshmen from the tiniest high schools (with 24 or fewer in their class) scored an average of 21.7, while an equal number of students from larger schools (with 150-199 in their class) recorded a 20.8 average score. The UNL freshmen from the largest high schools (with 250 or more in their class) averaged only 20.7 on the ACT. [31]

Lest one think this was a fluke, it is important to show the results for all Nebraska students in 1985 (the *only* year in which the ACT scores are available by size of school). What the data reveal is that Nebraska's smallest schools (with 1-24 graduates) and its largest schools (with 900+ graduates) produced *exactly the same average scores* . Interestingly, the scores for Nebraska's second smallest (24-99 graduates) and second largest (600-899 graduates) were virtually identical as well. The middle cohorts scored higher than either extreme, but there were not very important differences among any of the groups. [32]

What does all this mean? ACT scores were never intended to be used as indicators of high school quality. However, in the absence of more appropriate measures, they are one of the very few comparative yardsticks available. Nevertheless, these scores cannot legitimately be used to *prove* which schools are "better" than any others.

Still, it is awfully hard to come away from these "output" comparisons

without at least a grudging admiration for the performance of Nebraska's small rural schools. With all the strikes they have against them -- from the worst-paid teachers to the most restrictive curricula, and from the distractions caused by everyone *having to* directly participate in school activities to their lack of access to sophisticated urban-based resources -- somehow these small rural schools find a way to "deliver the goods".

This record becomes all the more impressive when one remembers that Nebraska's small rural schools are *at least* keeping pace with their larger, more urban counterparts in one of the nation's *leading* education states. As noted at the very outset of this report -- and confirmed by the U.S. Department of Education's "report card on the states" -- Nebraska's schools and students consistently rank among the nation's top performers.[33]

Interpreting the Data about Educational Quality

Two conclusions are clear. First, in comparison with other states, Nebraskans have ample reason to be proud of all their schools, urban and rural, large and small. Second, within Nebraska, an analysis of educational input, through-put and output information reveals that there is neither hard evidence, nor a persuasive argument, supporting the contention that educational quality is a function of size.

Despite the widespread belief among all parties in Nebraska's "Rural Education Debate" that enrollment size and quality are *somehow* deeply connected, the best available evidence tells a different story. The data, and a dose of reasonably objective analysis, indicate the simple truth that good schools and good school districts come in all shapes and sizes here (as do poor ones). There is no factual (or rational) basis for asserting that among Nebraska's schools "small is always beautiful" OR "bigger is always better".

Two final points about the issue of quality education. First, America's schools have never before been subject to such intense scrutiny from so many directions as has been the case in the continuing educational reform movement of the 1980s. There have been dozens of "national commissions", public and private sector "task forces", "blue ribbon" committees and individual experts poking and prodding the nation's schools and school districts from every conceivable angle.

One fascinating hallmark of these studies is the absence of interest,

discussion and recommendations from these distinguished leaders about the areas of reorganization, consolidation or other size-related issues. In the late 1950's, Harvard president, James Conant rocked the education world by assigning top priority to the elimination of all small high schools.[34] And, thousands of small high schools and small school districts were closed in the decades following Conant's clarion call.[35] Even so, there still are thousands of small high schools and small K-12 districts (by both Nebraska's and Conant's standards) remaining across the United States.[36]

This time around, however, there are no Conant-like pronouncements from our leading reseachers, intellectuals, practitioners or policymakers giving priority to the "problem" of having so many small schools and districts across America. In fact, on those rare occasions when size is mentioned at all, it is in the context of calling upon urban districts to *reduce the size* of their classes, schools and administrative units.[37]

Second, the message from the past decade of research on effective schools and positive learning environments is a potent one for large, mid-size and small schools alike. Differences in size bring with them a set of trade-offs. Some of the ten factors (presented earlier) associated with educational excellence and high-level student performance are more readily attained by larger schools, while others come more naturally to smaller schools. More important, all ten are within the reach of *all* the different size schools found among Nebraska's K-12 districts. Thus, Nebraska's historic fixation with school and district size must yield to other, more important, concerns -- from strong leadership to high expectations -- that mark the paths toward an increased quality of education.

As Nebraska continues to move along these paths, it enjoys some substantial advantages over other states. While not a very wealthy state, Nebraska's income distribution is less skewed than in most states. There is neither the same magnitude of urban poverty one would find in the Northeast U.S., nor the widespread presence of the rural "underclass" one finds across the entire South. The children growing up in these persistently depressed circumstances are the ones most likely to fail in, or drop out of, school. Therefore, part of Nebraska's "education magic" can be explained by the absence of large concentrations of such at-risk children.

There also are cultural advantages at work here. Nebraskans have a long tradition of valuing and supporting reasonably good public schools for all

children. Most of today's parents in Nebraska received a pretty solid basic education themselves -- and they are determined that their children will receive at least the same foundation. The reinforcement young Cornhuskers are given at home to stay and do the best they can at school apparently has had a positive impact on student attitudes and behaviors across Nebraska.

The last feature distinguishing Nebraska is its small class sizes. Only four other states can boast of lower pupil/teacher ratios.[38] This is primarily the influence of Nebraska's small rural schools, since the ratios in the state's larger, more urban schools are near, or above, the national average.[39]

While unsubstantiated by any systematic research, a common sense interpretation of all these data suggests that Nebraska's larger urban schools and smaller rural ones have taken two different routes to arrive at approximately the same levels of educational quality. The larger districts have opted for proportionately fewer -- but more experienced, highly paid, and highly credentialed -- teachers; for a curriculum with lots of options and tracks; and for a variety of specialized professional resources. At the same time, the smaller K-12 districts have chosen to emphasize markedly lower pupil/teacher ratios; generalist teachers; a strong core curriculum, with heavy doses of direct student participation in school activities; and close connections with the community and its resources.

To an outsider, it is fascinating to witness how well each strategy has worked in creating Nebraska's overall "educational magic". Equally striking is the extent to which the various parties in the educational debate seem unwilling to acknowledge each other's contributions to Nebraska's success in surpassing national norms -- or to accept that there may be more than one path that leads to the shared goal of educational excellence.

Sizing Up the Issues of Economy and Efficiency

When confronted with the reality that Nebraska's small rural K-12 school systems cannot legitimately be disparaged on the basis of the data about educational quality, the advocates of larger, more urban districts turn their attention to the issues of economy and efficiency. Put simply, they argue that small rural schools cost too much, do not spend what they have wisely, and thus, end up wasting scarce public dollars.

Although the terms *economy* and *efficiency* often are used simplistically

(and interchangably), it is wrong to do so. Like the concept of educational *quality* , there are a variety of ways in which the meanings of economy and efficiency have been twisted to serve ideological ends.

In the educational arena, *economy* is an enormous Pandora's Box. This is due to the fact that the basic question it raises -- can schools be operated for less money -- always has the same answer: YES ! Every school and school district in Nebraska, of any size or description, could be run more economically (that is, for a *lot* less money) than at present.

It is a very straightforward process. All that needs to be done is to eliminate a portion of existing services and personnel. For example, Nebraska's schools could reduce costs by well over 35 million dollars a year by getting out of the transportation business. If parents brought their own children to and from school, the cost to taxpayers of educating each and every student would drop by an average of more than $130. [40]

Once the *economy* bandwagon starts rolling, the savings can really add up. Think, for instance, of the millions upon millions of dollars to be saved by eliminating all school sports, and other extra-curricular programs. Just imagine the enormous savings to be realized if the Nebraska Legislature mandated that no school could have *less* than thirty pupils per teacher. Indeed, why not eliminate all vocational education activities and let the private sector bear all training costs for their employees? Why not cut all course offerings and subject areas -- such as art, music, drama and foreign languages -- that are not tested on the ACT? Why not eliminate all but one administrator per school, as well as all "support staff" like librarians, counselors, and speech therapists? Why not charge tuition and make K-12 students buy their own books and materials -- as public universities do -- in order to defray the more than 100 million dollars of taxpayer money spent each year to maintain and operate school physical plants? [41]

Any real savings to be gained by merging some small rural K-12 school districts, or by combining several small high schools, is mere "chicken feed" compared with the potential savings to be gained by taking *any* of the cost-cutting measures mentioned above. If the primary goal of the Nebraska Legislature is to save the taxpayers money, then it would seem "smart" to start with these really big categories of school expenditures.

Fortunately, Nebraska's legislators understand there would be a heavy

long-term price to pay for this kind of short-sighted frugality. They already recognize that their primary responsibility is to ensure that *all* the state's children have access to good public schools. Supporting the best schools resources permit, rather than the cheapest ones imaginable, is a wise investment in the future of Nebraska and its economy.

As these examples should make clear, a genuinely "hard-nosed" pursuit of any and all *economies* in public schooling very quickly could become a risky, and educationally counter-productive, course of action. This argues for a public focus on *efficiency* , rather than economy.

Computing Efficiency

However, this focus will be a useful one if, and only if, there is an accurate understanding of the meaning of this concept. Efficiency refers to the relationship between cost and quality. There are two basic ways in which efficiencies can be achieved: first, by holding the quality/output constant while *lowering* the cost; or 2) by holding the cost constant while *raising* the quality/output.

If a farmer figures out a way to produce the *same yield* of the *same quality* crop as last year, but at a *reduced cost* per acre, then that farmer has become more efficient. Similarly, if another farmer discovers how to create a *greater yield or a better quality* crop at the *same cost* as last year, then he too has become more efficient.

There also are false efficiencies. If a farmer cuts costs, but ends up with an inferior yield or product, then there is no efficiency gain. So too, if another farmer raises a much better crop, but spends a lot more money doing so, then there are no real efficiencies achieved here either.

Applying this economic concept to a service, such as schooling, rather than to a product, can be tricky. Measurements of a school's, or school district's, efficiency are greatly complicated by the absence of tangible outputs and standard definitions of quality in the world of education. This also makes legitimate comparisons among schools on the basis of efficiency much more difficult than they may seem at first glance. Accordingly, mistaking false efficiencies for real ones becomes all too common.

For example, if school X (with thirty students) and school Y (with three

hundred students) each have one $3,000 computer, it would be easy to conclude that school Y, with a per pupil computer cost of $10, is far more efficient than school X, with its $100 per pupil computer cost. However, it would be incorrect to calculate efficiency so superficially.

With thirty instructional hours per week, each student at school X has one full hour of computer time each week. By contrast, each student at school Y would have only six minutes of computer time a week -- not enough time to do anything educationally worthwhile. School Y may decide to limit access to its computer to only thirty students (10 % of its student body), but then 270 of Y's students have no chance to use the computer at all. Suddenly, it is no longer clear that school Y is more efficient, because while it enjoys lower costs, it also is burdened with lower per student yields. On the basis of a comparison of actual computer use, school X now looks like the more efficient one even though its per pupil costs are so much higher. So, school X is the better one, right? The correct answer is maybe. What remains unknown are the outcomes -- the true quality/results -- of the time students at each school gained by using the computer.

If fifteen of the students at school X (50% of the total membership) used the computer in really creative and academically beneficial ways, while the same number of students at school Y (but only 5% of the total membership) were equally creative and successful, then school X could claim to be at least as efficient as school Y. Of course, if the goal of having the computer at all was to allow *every* student to become computer literate, then school X (with 100% success) is far better than school Y (with only 10% success).

Wait a minute, the believers in the "bigger is better" ideology might say. This is an unrealistic example. What's more likely to be true is that school Y would have five computers, rather than only one. This would raise their per pupil computer cost to $50, but still keep their costs well below the $100 rate at school X. This would enable each student at school Y to have half an hour a week on the computer. Moreover, the chances are that the bigger school (Y) would have a more highly credentialed, specialist teacher instructing the students on the use of the computer. Therefore, even with less actual computer time, the Y students would receive as much educational benefit as the X students -- and at half the cost per pupil.

Not so fast, the "small is beautiful" believers might respond. How can school

Y claim to be more efficient when it has spent *five times* as much money ($15,000 vs. $3,000 in school X) to provide its students with *one-half* as much computer time? Besides, there is not one bit of evidence proving that a more highly-credentialed, specialist teacher can compensate for students having 50% less "hands on" computer experience. In fact, it is just as plausible to argue that much of the real educational value of computers is derived from students having the time and space to experiment, and from their taking the responsibility for learning by doing, rather than having it all spoon-fed to them by a specialist teacher.

Therefore, they might point out that school Y is achieving a false efficiency. After all, spending less for a lower quality/yield is an example of being cheap -- not efficient. For school Y to claim the same level of quality, it would have to provide the same level of access and participation. This means buying one computer for every thirty students (a total of ten for school Y). At this point, the per pupil computer cost is $100 at each school, with neither school having an obvious edge in efficiency.

School Y may reply that they still provide their students with a specialist teacher -- an advantage that results in higher quality education. Even if they could demonstrate a real (rather than merely *assumed*) relationship between higher teacher credentials and better student outcomes, they still would not necessarily be able to claim greater efficiency. After all, school Y is paying more for this specialist teacher than school X pays for its generalist teacher. Paying more to achieve more may be a smart strategy, but that does not make it a more technically-efficient one.

Which school is more efficient even in this one little area? The truth is that neither one can be declared more efficient with anything resembling scientific certainty. It's <u>hard</u> to prove efficiency in education, especially given both the paucity of outcome evidence and the inherent ambiguities of measuring "yields" in service-producing institutions.

If trying to sort out the comparative efficiencies of computer usage in two schools is this difficult and ambiguous, then just imagine the problems in sorting out the efficiency of all aspects of educational expenditure in all of Nebraska's schools.

Efficient at Doing What?

Of course, the "bigger is better" advocates -- i.e., the ones castigating Nebraska's small rural schools for their alleged inefficiencies -- avoid these difficulties by substituting rhetoric for analysis. Overlooking the complexities of the efficiency issue has no intellectual integrity, but decrying "inefficiency", even if falsely, still has a lot of political currency.

Their case has a strong superficial appeal. Larger, more urban districts are able to provide a broader curriculum and better paid specialist teachers at a lower per pupil cost than small rural K-12 systems. What clearer, or more convincing, evidence could anyone need of their efficiency?

The first flaw with this simplistic reckoning of efficiency is that a broader curriculum and more expensive, specialized teachers are not synonymous with higher educational quality or better student outcomes. This point was explored in detail earlier in the report. Without evidence of comparable quality, lower costs cannot legitimately be used to infer greater efficiency.

The earlier exploration demonstrated that there are no automatic connections between school or district size and overall educational quality among K-12 systems in Nebraska. Therefore, to compare school systems, questions about efficiency must be more specific and result-oriented.

In comparing Class V (Omaha) and Class II schools (which have higher per pupil expenditures), the question: "which is more efficient at doing what?", is the only appropriate one to ask. If we ask which is more efficient at providing specialized inputs, Omaha would win easily. If we ask which is more efficient at producing good ACT scores, there would not be a clear winner because their overall scores are so close. However, if we ask which is more efficient at preventing dropouts and retaining students through graduation, the Class II districts would win by a very large margin.

This is a reminder that *efficiency* , like *quality* , has little real meaning in the abstract. Only after defining the terms and carefully analyzing solid evidence about specific areas can any meaningful determinations about efficiency be made. Crude comparisons of per pupil costs across districts are just that -- crude -- and largely meaningless in assessing actual efficiency.

Special Needs , Special Conditions, and Special Costs

Ironically, if simply comparing per pupil costs is a fair measure of efficiency, then the Nebraska Department of Education operates the most inefficient K-12 school system in the Cornhusker state. After all, the two Department-operated schools have a total teaching staff of 43 (*plus* a variety of administrators and professional specialists) serving a combined total of only 119 students. This results in an aggregate pupil/teacher ratio of 3.2 at the secondary level and 2.2 at the elementary level (a ratio no small rural K-12 system can match). Given the relatively high salaries of this staff, plus the special materials, facilities and other unique costs involved, the Department's per pupil costs here greatly exceed that of any of the Class II and III systems routinely called inefficient.[42]

Are the Nebraska Department of Education's own schools really such a shocking example of inefficiency and a profligate waste of the taxpayers' hard-earned money? Probably not, but then neither are the other Nebraska K-12 systems judged solely by per pupil cost data. The problem here lies in the yardstick used, not in the schools themselves. The Department-operated schools cost a lot of money per pupil, *not* because they are grossly inefficient, but rather because of: 1) the (mercifully) low incidence of children requiring such schooling; and 2) the labor-intensive method of education deemed to be most appropriate for them to reach their potential. While the students in small rural schools are not in need of the same types of "special education" offered at these schools, there are often special circumstances that elevate the level of per pupil expenditures needed to educate them properly and, yes, efficiently.

These mitigating circumstances can be found in the realities of rurality. Just as the Nebraska School for the Visually Handicapped experiences high costs because of the low incidence of students, so too, Nebraska's most rural K-12 systems (the Schools for the *Geographically* Handicapped) also have high per pupil costs because of low incidence rates. Even if the state's push to eliminate all Class I and VI districts succeeds, this reorganization will not suddenly make sparsely-populated areas into metropolitan ones.

For instance, there are only 88 school-aged children in all of Arthur County! There doesn't appear to be a population boom in the making there either, since only 32 children below the age of six live in this entire county. This is not a freak example. Nebraska contains 21 whole *counties* in which

there is at least one group of children below the age of six who number in the single digits. Similarly, there are 35 *counties* -- more than a third of Nebraska's counties -- containing less than 1,000 pupils (including all elementary and secondary, public and private students).[43]

The Hayes County situation illustrates the relevance of sparse population to per pupil costs. As in the dreams of Nebraska's consolidation advocates, there is only one public school system serving the entire county (and no private schools). The Hayes Center Public Schools do not pay their teachers exorbitantly. In fact, at only $18,020, the typical Hayes Center teacher receive a salary significantly below the state average -- and thus, way below the national average.[44] Hayes County only spent a total of $22,417 on all support services (compared to the $16,474,997 spent on such services in Douglas County) and the princely sum of $14,560 on school maintenance (out of the nearly $30 *million* paid by Nebraska's schools for maintenance the same year). [45]

Thus, it would appear that the Hayes Center Public Schools are a model of frugality, financial responsibility and operating efficiency. And yet, their 1985-86 per pupil expenditure of $4,744 was more than 50% higher than the state average of $3,056 for K-12 systems.[46]

Why? The primary reason is that with only 174 students in the whole county, the *per pupil* costs of providing even the bare minimum of educational personnel and services are inevitably high. Hayes County has a 50% higher than average cost largely because it has a pupil/teacher ratio more than 50% lower than the state average for K-12 systems.[47]

In addition, there are a variety of costs that remain fixed without regard to the number of students among whom these costs can be spread. A microscope and a film projector cost the same amount (if not little more because of transport costs) in Hayes County as in Douglas County, no matter how children benefit from them.

Transportation costs also point out the extent to which the *necessary* costs of a rural education are mislabeled as *inefficient* through the use of the per pupil cost yardstick. Hayes County had to spend $125,227 in order to transport its students to and from school.[48] This breaks down to $720 per student per year. Compare this with the state average of $130 per pupil and it becomes obvious that the Hayes Center Public Schools are either

horrendously inefficient in the area of transportation -- or that per pupil costs are horrendously inappropriate as a measure of transportation efficiency in a rural context. Bet on the second alternative.

Hayes County spent a whopping $70,586 on school administration (a rate of $406 per pupil) whereas Douglas County paid out "only" $6,470,912 for administration (a per pupil rate of only $95).[49] In order for Hayes County to become as "efficient" as Douglas County it would have to limit its total administrative budget to $16,530. Obviously, this is not enough to hire even one professional school administrator.

What is Hayes County supposed to do to become more "efficient" and to bring their per pupil costs in line with the state K-12 average? Which already poorly-paid teachers should take a salary cut? Which families should be dropped from the school bus routes? Which fundamental programs and services should be eliminated in order to bring the budget down? Which of the children in this rural county should have their limited educational opportunities constrained even further in order to appease the state officials who falsely equate per pupil expenditure and efficiency?

The simple truth of the matter is that per pupil expenditure calculations inherently, and inevitably, discriminate against rural school systems. Comparing per pupil costs is an unfair, inaccurate and scientifically unsound method for measuring the relative efficiency of Nebraska's schools. There simply are too few young people in most rural areas to make rural schools look good on the per pupil cost yardstick. Thus, in a rural context, this yardstick is measuring a lack of fecundity, not efficiency.

To accuse Nebraska's rural school systems of being inefficient when they already are producing good results -- and doing so without the extra programs, staff, and facilities taken for granted in any metropolitan school system -- is not just wrong. It is cruel. It is, in fact, tantamount to blaming rural people for living, and attending school, in a rural area. To an outsider, it is nothing short of amazing that this anti-rural bias would flourish in as sparsely-populated and agriculturally-dependent a state as Nebraska.

Spend Too Much Compared to What?

The fact that there are higher per pupil costs associated with rurality and sparsity of population needs to be acknowledged and accepted in Nebraska.

If anything, rural school systems like Hayes Center ought to be encouraged to spend more money per pupil. Additional spending would help ensure that their teachers are adequately compensated, and that their students have the resources necessary to promote educational excellence.

Still, not all small rural schools are located in very sparsely-populated areas. Some Class II districts, for example, are located in fairly close proximity to other schools and towns. Beyond the technical efficiency argument, let's address the common sense concern about whether the K-12 systems that are small by choice spend too much money.
It is worth remembering that these small rural systems do *not* spend more total dollars than their larger neighbors, although they do generally spend more per pupil. The Class III systems (most of which are small and rural) already have lower aggregate per pupil costs ($3,197) than either the larger Class IV ($3,416) or largest Class V ($3,233) schools. The Class II districts have a higher aggregate per pupil expenditure ($4,682), with wider cost variations than in any other K-12 group.[50] Of course, the Class II districts also are the ones most vulnerable to the extra costs associated with the realities of being both small and rural.

No matter how much consolidation occurs among the non-isolated schools that are small by choice, any "savings" would be minor in a statewide context. An exaggerated estimate of these potential "savings" should provide readers with some perspective on even the most wildly optimistic estimates of the potential financial gains involved here.

Suppose the Class II systems somehow managed to reduce their costs to the same per pupil average as the Class III districts -- that is, from $4,682 down to $3,197. Even in this fantasy, the total savings would amount to less than 1.5% of the state's annual public education expenditures. This is *less* money than the Omaha Public Schools spend each year just on the physical operation of their school buildings. It is less money than Nebraska schools get from "non-revenue receipts" -- that is, after excluding all local, county, state, and federal funds for education. In fact, it is *less* money than Douglas County spends annually in the "Office of Principal" category.[51]

Still, there is a nagging feeling that the K-12 systems that remain small by choice are spending too much. Whether this is true hinges on the definition of "too much". The real question is: "Too much compared to what?".

If the definition is "compared to what would be spent if these children attended larger schools within easy commuting distance", then the answer usually will be "Yes, they spend too much".

Case closed, right? Not necessarily, for there are other comparisons worthy of serious consideration. For example, if the question is "Do these small schools cost too much compared to the level of personal attention and direct participation they provide?", then the answer changes dramatically.

As noted at the end of the section on educational quality, there appear to be two distinctly different paths to excellence taken by the larger and smaller systems. The larger systems have relied on highly-credentialed, relatively well-paid, specialist teachers; lots of curricular offerings; and good access to a spectrum of professional and material resources.

Small rural schools will never be able to afford this style of education. Transplanting a scaled-down version of the Lincoln Public Schools' teachers, curricula and resources to the Class II and smaller Class III systems would raise both the absolute and the per pupil costs of these schools to astronomical levels (i.e., deep into five digit dollar amounts).

The secrets of being able to afford a Lincoln-style education, even in Lincoln, are: to enroll thousands of students among whom to spread the costs of all services, materials and personnel; to distribute resources thinly (but widely); to maintain relatively high pupil/teacher ratios; to emphasize group instruction; to tolerate the disappearance of difficult students through dropping out; and to severely limit the extent of direct student participation in both school and extra-curricular activities.
This strategy has worked pretty well in Lincoln, but it has little relevance or feasibility in the countryside. The fact is that small K-12 districts have been able to deliver educational <u>results</u> comparable to Lincoln's -- without bearing the exorbitant costs that would accompany a Lincoln-style education in these rural settings. In a better world, this reality would destroy the perception of rural educators as a bunch of spendthrifts, and allow them to be seen, correctly, as remarkably clever and frugal leaders.

The small school secret for achieving good results at a reasonable cost has been to: emphasize individualized instruction and low pupil/teacher ratios; ensure direct participation in school activities by virtually every student; offer a strong core curriculum; hire competent generalist teachers; take

advantage of close connections with the local community; and simply learn to do without a variety of resources taken for granted in larger schools.

Just as a Lincoln-style education would be outrageously expensive in the context of small rural schools, so too, a rural-style education would be frightfully expensive to implement in a large school context.

Think, for example, of the cost implications of Lincoln bringing its pupil/teacher ratio into line with the Class II districts. Imagine the bill if Lincoln (like many rural systems) had more than 50% of their high school students playing in the band ... *and* participating in school drama productions... *and* serving as members of athletic teams. The rural strategy of combining intensely individualized instruction with a heavy dose of "learning by doing" makes perfect sense in small schools, but remains a very difficult and costly one to translate into the context of larger schools and communities.

Instead of small school advocates begrudging large schools their fancy resources, and large school advocates begrudging small schools their low pupil/teacher ratios, wouldn't it be more honest to accept that each is already pursuing the most economical and efficient method of progressing along their *appropriately different* paths to educational excellence?

Do the schools that are small by choice cost too much when compared with the total level of public dollars allocated to these communities? It is vital to Nebraska's economic and social well-being that there continue to be a strong rural sector. Rural people generally work hard, are productive and make comparatively few demands upon the public purse for social and public services. There are no state-supported cultural (and other public) facilities in each of the communities having Class II school systems, nor do they receive the economic benefits of the big state and federal government payrolls fueling the Lincoln and Omaha areas. Given their limited overall demands upon the state purse, is it really so unreasonable for them to want to maintain their own "too expensive" public schools?

Do the schools that are small by choice cost too much when compared with the loyalty, trust and support they inspire among students, staff, parents and taxpayers alike? What pricetag is appropriately attached to the ability of these small schools to prevent dropouts, to raise student aspirations and to guide their pupils all the way through graduation? Are they too

expensive when their function as the focal point of rural community identity and rural community life is taken into account?

There are five basic conclusions to be drawn from this examination of the issues of economy and efficiency in Nebraska's small rural K-12 districts:

1. Although it would be incredibly short-sighted to implement such measures, there is no doubt that all schools and districts (large and small, urban and rural) could be operated more economically -- that is, cheaply -- by eliminating a portion of existing staff and services.

2. If the chief goal of Nebraska's Legislature is to reduce the cost of public education, there are several ways of doing so that will yield far greater savings, and cause less harm to the state's core educational missions, than the strategy of creating bigger schools and larger administrative units.

3. Efficiency in public schooling is very difficult to calculate accurately. The simplistic comparison of per pupil expenditures has no validity as an indicator of efficiency. Moreover, per pupil calculations *inherently* discriminate against all rural school systems.

4. The majority of rural schools in Nebraska are small by necessity -- that is, as a function of low population density and the proper limits of travel. There are a variety of unavoidably higher costs stemming from the realities of rurality. There is no evidence indicating that these necessarily small schools are either inefficient, or anything other than frugal. In fact, they may be significantly underfunded.

5. The minority of rural schools that are small by choice could, at least in theory, merge with neighboring schools and reduce overall expenditures. However, in view of the likely social, political and educational consequences, it is by no means obvious that this is prudent course of action. Communities which choose to combine their K-12 systems in order to reap whatever gains they believe will result are free to do so. Still, there is no evidence suggesting a compelling reason for the state to intervene by encouraging -- let alone *mandating* -- such mergers.

THE SPECULATIVE SIDE OF THE "RURAL EDUCATION DEBATE"

By national standards, Nebraska is in the enviable position of simultaneously outperforming and underspending nearly every other state. Its small rural K-12 schools are anything *but* a drag on Nebraska's success. Bigger urban schools are not demonstrably better, educationally, than smaller rural ones in the Cornhusker state -- nor are they demonstrably more frugal or more efficient. Rather, both sets of schools remain net contributors to Nebraska's "education magic".

So, what's the problem? Why do rural education leaders feel so besieged and at risk, when they clearly are doing a good job? Why do state officials treat small rural schools as if they are guilty until proven innocent? Why is there bad blood among the parties in Nebraska's "Rural Education Debate"? Why is there such a debate at all?

As an outsider, I am not privy to all the behind the scenes discussions, nor have I had an opportunity to witness the intricate maneuverings of the various participants in the debate about the future of Nebraska's rural schools. However, as an observer and student of such controversies around the U.S. and overseas -- and as someone who has reviewed the written record in Nebraska and talked with a cross-section of the relevant parties -- I am willing to share some thoughts about what might be happening in the Cornhusker state and what might be done to improve the situation.

Until this point, the report has presented a reasonably objective analysis of the facts of the case. What appears now are some brief interpretations of, and speculations about, the causes and consequences of this debate. My purpose in offering these views is to encourage all the people involved to move beyond the sniping, the personal rivalries, the political power plays and the general divisiveness that keep Nebraska education from moving forward (or even safeguarding its current comparative advantages).

Public education as a whole is losing ground here. Spending in the Cornhusker state has not kept pace with the rest of the country. In terms of significant new directions, and support, for educational improvement, the national push for better schools has echoed only faintly in Nebraska

Divisions within the education community are one key factor behind this

lack of progress. If they are not bridged and healed, these internal splits will have their most adverse effects on the quality of education available to students across the entire state. This negative result is avoidable if, and only if, Nebraska's education community starts pulling together -- instead of allowing itself to be pulled apart.

A Waning Sense of Interdependence

Nebraska has undergone a variety of important economic and demographic shifts in the past generation.[52] The result of these changes is a state experiencing rural depopulation and urban growth, agricultural decline and non-farm economic development, and a movement away from a traditional agrarian culture and toward a newer, more cosmopolitan way of life.

These are not abstract forces, but rather ones which effect everyday life in myriad ways. The socio-economic and demographic changes sweeping Nebraska impact upon income levels, employment opportunities, young people's decisions about where to live and raise a family, entertainment preferences and alternatives, tax bases, and school enrollments.

Not surprisingly, these changes also are permanently altering Nebraska politics. The Nebraska Legislature is fairly evenly divided along rural/urban lines -- a circumstance contributing to deadlocks in education funding and other key issues. Predictions are that the rural interests historically dominating the Legislature will hear their death-knell when the next reapportionment swings the balance of power to the state's more metropolitan areas.

There appears to be some genuine antipathy between these groups -- perhaps born of the rural senators' frustration at seeing their collective power and influence subside, and perhaps also born of the urban senators' desire to exact a measure of retribution for the frustrations they have had to endure for so long at the hands of their rural colleagues. To an outsider, it is sad to hear the degree to which rural interests and urban interests (both within and beyond the Legislature) talk as if the other represented a foreign, and somewhat hostile, nation -- rather than part of their own state.

Precious little sense of interdependence and mutual support between rural and urban interests is evident in Nebraska today. Omaha people don't want "their" dollars used to pay for schools in rural tax havens, while country

people don't want "their" taxes used to build a swimming pool for the Millard students (while their own children have to make do without any recreational facilities). Both groups too often act as if the ties between Nebraska's cities and countryside are superficial and optional. They are not. Indeed, like Siamese twins, these bonds are so deep and unavoidable that one cannot survive, let alone *thrive* , without the cooperation of the other.

This internecine warfare between Nebraska's rural and urban factions is particularly dangerous and destructive to the best interests of public education. While both sides have legitimate grievances against the other (and no one comes out smelling like a rose), the time has come to put aside all the acrimony and work together as harmoniously as human nature will allow. The simple truth is that no matter who "wins" the on-going urban/rural fight, the state's children and the state's economy will be the ultimate losers.

An Outdated and Unfair System of School Finance

One major source of tension between urban and rural interests is the archaic school finance system used in the Cornhusker state. With approximately two-thirds of the money for public education coming from local sources (primarily property taxes), Nebraska ranks second only to New Hampshire in the extent to which it allows the vagaries of property wealth to determine the distribution of educational resources.

Ironically, the current system encourages a large proportion of both rural people (through the creation of property tax havens) and urban people (through the minimal taxation of income to support schools) to avoid paying anything resembling their "fair share" of the school finance bill. The net effect of this "double whammy" can be seen in the following figures:[53]

In terms of <u>potential</u> support for education, Nebraska ranks:

24th in the nation in terms of per capita personal income
25th in personal income per pupil
2nd in *growth* of per capita disposable personal income

In terms of <u>actual</u> support for education, Nebraska ranks:

35th in the nation in per pupil expenditures (86% of the U.S. average)

37th in per pupil expenditures as a portion of per capita income
42nd in average teacher salaries (83% of the U.S. average)

Although it beyond the purview of this report to make detailed suggestions about Nebraska's school finance system, it seems clear that:[54]

a) the entire system is in need of a thorough overhaul (piecemeal reforms will not be sufficient);

b) there needs to be an accurate (not anecdotal) assessment of the genuine ability of all Nebraskans to pay their fair share for schools, based upon both property wealth and income;

c) the reliance on local property wealth, even fairly valued and equitably taxed, will have to diminish;

d) the use of multiple non-local methods of financing schools (both existing and new) will have to increase;

e) once *everyone* is paying their fair share, funds should be disbursed on the basis of the resources needed to establish an effective and efficient basic education program in each K-12 system (i.e., on an equitable, rather than equal, basis -- without regard to per pupil costs); and

f) beyond the basic program, each school system needs an option for financing "extra" costs through limited local taxation, plus access to a major pool of non-locally funded discretionary school improvement resources (perhaps administered through the ESUs, with priority given to the state's less wealthy communities and school districts).

In seeking the most appropriate technical solutions for making the Nebraska school finance system fairer, two essential goals must be met. First, the technical solutions also must satisfy the political criterion of reducing tensions between the state's urban and rural factions.

Second, there must be a new financial commitment to educational excellence. In every region of the U.S., legislators have backed up their rhetorical commitment to improving the public schools with unprecedented new investments of state resources. Nationally, state aid increased by more than 25% between 1983 and 1986. Five states registered an increase of

more than 50% during this period. Among nearby states, Minnesota was up by 61%, Wyoming by 53%, Colorado by 29%, Kansas and Missouri by 27% and South Dakota by 17%. Among states with *more* school districts than Nebraska, state aid increased by at least 30% in each one. Even the only state *more* dependent upon local taxes than Nebraska upped its state aid by 11% during this period.[55]

What about Nebraska? During this time of extraordinary state investments in education across the U.S., Nebraska's state aid to public schools actually **dropped** by 7% ![56] It would be a shame for the Cornhusker state to squander the educational advantages it traditionally has enjoyed compared to the rest of the nation. Yet, Nebraska cannot expect perpetual financial sacrifices on the part of its teachers, nor can it expect to make qualitative improvements in education without spending significantly more money. This is the real world -- and if Nebraska wants to avoid becoming a second-rate state, educationally, it will have to pay the improvement bill.

Standards, YES ; Standardization, NO

If Nebraska's taxpayers and legislators agree to increase their financial support of the public schools, they have a right to demand heightened levels of educational quality in return.

Moreover, they have the right to insist upon genuine measures of quality rather than either superficial proxies (including such inputs as shiny new buildings and a dazzling array of course titles) or any single indicator (such as ACT scores).

What is needed is a statewide evaluation process emphasizing two areas: 1) the extent to which schools actually are behaving in accordance with the research-validated elements of effective schools and positive learning environments (described earlier); and 2) the actual performance of schools on a *diverse* set of output measures, ranging from dropout/graduation rates to ACT scores -- and from student/parent/teacher evaluations to appropriate competency tests that go beyond simple "paper and pencil" examinations and the recall of facts.

Creating and implementing a really good assessment system will be neither easy, nor inexpensive. However, in a world in which people *can* figure out how to increase agricultural yields, prevent polio and diagnose mental

illnesses, it is not unreasonable to expect that fair and accurate measures of school quality can be developed. While there is much to be learned from the search for methods of measuring educational quality elsewhere, there is no reason for Nebraskans to sit passively on the sidelines.

Taking this challenge seriously will require a new set of actions on the part of both local and state education officials. It demands a major statewide research, development and data collection effort. Whether this is undertaken by the state's higher education institutions, the ESUs, the private sector and/or the Nebraska Department of Education should be based upon which groups are most competent to carry out which parts of this agenda. It also requires far more local cooperation and participation in both the design and conduct of such work than has been true in the past.

What all this boils down to is the creation of *appropriate* standards for the behavior and performance of public educational institutions -- and a rational, systematic, non-anecdotal method for helping schools discover both how close they are coming to meeting these standards and what steps they might take to improve their quality.

What it absolutely does *not* imply is a new state-level push for school standardization. There appears to be a fundamental confusion between the terms "standards" and "standardization", perhaps because they sound alike. However, they are not one and the same.

"Standards" refers an agreed-upon set of objectives that can, and ought to, be achieved by all people.[57] For example, it's perfectly reasonable to insist that someone graduating from high school be able to read at a certain level of proficiency. There are core competencies that transcend differences in school size, geographic location or socio-economic background. Obviously, there needs to be a very tight connection between these standards and the quality criteria upon which schools will be measured.

By contrast, "standardization" refers to the misguided notion that there is *only one way* to achieve these educational standards -- i.e., that there exists one best method of schooling that should be used by all people everywhere in all circumstances.

Aside from the metropolitan bias that permeates the particular standardized educational model lurking in the minds of educators in

Nebraska and elsewhere, the whole concept of there only being one right path to educational excellence is extraordinarily arrogant. It greatly exaggerates the degree to which *anyone* firmly understands what is most educationally-appropriate for what children under what circumstances. At the same time, it ignores how much we *do* know about different learning styles, the value of alternative pedagogies, and the need to treat children as individuals, rather than pretending that they are all the same.

For better or worse, education is still much more of an art than a science. It still requires trial and error, an open mind, genuine humility in the face of our gaps in understanding, and a willingness to search for ever-better ways of promoting effective learning and all the other positive outcomes our society expects from its public schools.

Rural Paths to Educational Excellence

Much of the "bad blood", and the waning sense of interdependence, between urban and rural interests can be traced back to the legacy of this standardization mentality.

If people truly believe there is only one right way to educate children -- and it *just happens* to be the way its done in Lincoln, Millard, Westside or other relatively large, urban systems -- then it's hardly astonishing that these individuals would have little respect for the different styles of education to be found in Hampton, Table Rock, Rising City or other small rural schools. Couple this factor with the simplistic conceptions of both quality and efficiency that have permeated educational policy in Nebraska (as elsewhere), and one can see a sure-fire recipe for half-baked negative judgements about the state's small rural K-12 schools.

As the first sections of this report pointed out, there is no legitimate basis for the belief that creating bigger schools, or bigger K-12 districts, will result in significantly better or more efficient units. And yet, state officials in Nebraska have never had -- and still lack -- a coherent plan for how to improve rural schools. They only have had plans for how to make them bigger and more standardized -- that is, more like miniature replicas of the metropolitan model of education they prefer.

The long-standing, bitter struggles over size, organization and finance have diverted Nebraskans' attention away from an intensive quest for how best

to enhance the quality of small rural schools in the Cornhusker state. There is almost the sense that the fiercest combatants in the battle over the *structure* of public schooling stay so fixated on this issue because they don't have any real agenda concerning the *substance* of rural education.

What is sorely lacking at the moment is any compelling vision of what a quality *rural* education in Nebraska might encompass. As is the case across America, there has been a terrific failure of imagination here. Nebraska has an opportunity unprecedented in its history to make its rural schools strong and vital -- and to make them second to none in qualitative terms. Unfortunately, that opportunity is slipping away because of the inability to even conceive of the nature of a first-rate *rural* education.

Spelling out a detailed plan for rural school improvement is beyond the mandate of this report. Nevertheless, there are several key elements of such a plan that Cornhuskers may wish to consider -- and to develop in ways feasible and appropriate in the context of rural Nebraska.[58]

First, there should be a concerted effort to *make the rural community the foundation of the curriculum* , rather than incidental to it. Educational policymakers have viewed rural schools and communities in terms of a deficit model -- that is, in terms of what they *lack* , rather than what they *have* . However, both the natural environment and the human resources existing in rural areas could be tapped far more productively for educational purposes than has been the case in the modern era.

Second, there should be a strong push to *connect rural education and rural economic development in mutually supportive ways* . The interdependence of schools and the local economy is nowhere more apparent than in a rural setting -- and yet, these connections have been acted upon only rarely. Nebraska's rural schools could be a great resource, not only for students as they strive to reach their highest individual potential, but also for communities as they strive to reach their highest collective potential. At the same time, becoming actively engaged in the larger process of revitalizing their own communities would offer rural students important skills, educational experiences and a "real world laboratory" to complement their more formal, classroom-based work.

Third, there should be encouragement and assistance to *promote creative methods of individualized/small group instruction* . Most rural educators

(because of both standardization pressures and their own metropolitan oriented professional socialization) perpetuate pedagogies that take little advantage of the inherent rural benefit of low pupil/teacher ratios. Most rural teachers choose to use the same methods with very small classes that urban teachers *have to use* in order to manage much larger groups. There are a variety of alternatives available to rearrange the use of school time, to emphasize interdisciplinary studies and to take full advantage of modern instructional technologies, that rural schools should explore and test.

And fourth, there should be a renewed commitment to *strengthen and extend the traditional rural emphasis on "learning by doing"* . The pressures to add more and more formal courses, and to emulate metropolitan models of education, have resulted in an unnecessary degree of passive, "textbook and lecture" learning activities in rural schools.

Just as in extra-curricular programs where the greatest educational and personal benefits are derived by those actively and directly *participating* , so too, the academic program should not make students into spectators and consumers of their own education. The inherent characteristics of small rural schools make an emphasis on "learning by doing" more feasible than in large schools. Rural educators should be encouraged to organize student and teacher exchanges, arrange academically-relevant apprenticeships and devise extended "off-campus" programs that enhance the rural curriculum.

The directions suggested above are not about allowing rural children to squeak by with a second-rate education. Rather, they are an attempt to point out some likely features of the multiple paths to genuine rural educational excellence.

It is astonishing that as our post-industrial society enters the information age, so many educational and political leaders still believe it is necessary to put rural children on buses for long periods each day so that they can attend school at a "central location" in order to receive a good education. Why transport children long distances to where the resources have been stored, when it is fully within our technical capabilities to bring a vast array of top-notch educational resources directly to them?

Nebraska's rural educators (if assisted, rather than thwarted, by the state) could choose to combine advanced technologies with the re-establishment

of educationally-powerful school-community bonds. This merger of high-tech instruction and community-based learning could produce both a dynamic educational process and solid performance outcomes.

By pursuing this course, perhaps with the support of the ESUs, Nebraska could create a new kind of rural education -- one that takes full advantage of its rurality and smallness, while simultaneously tapping the best external learning resources available. Thus, the basic idea is to select the finest features of a variety of educational methods and materials in order to create a stronger, more vital rural "hybrid".

Final Thoughts

The "bad blood" permeating the "Rural Education Debate" is an enormous threat to the quality, equality and efficiency of Nebraska's schools. School size, course offerings, reorganization plans, funding formulas, test scores, per pupil expenditures and all the other official topics of debate are treated as if they are the heart of the matter. They are not.

Such technical considerations have attracted an enormous amount of interest because people on each side of the divide have found them to be covenient battlegrounds on which to wage the underlying war over divergent values, beliefs, loyalties and traditions.

There <u>are</u> significant differences in the dominant urban and rural attitudes toward the schools they support. While each group of parents and educators cares deeply about their children and wants them to have the best schools possible, there are divergent views of what "best" means.

In an urban context, there is a heavy emphasis on education as preparation for the socio-economic competition students will enter in the larger society. This is basically a competition to get as far "up the ladder" as one can in a variety of *large-scale* institutions providing further education, employment and other benefits. One of the ironies of urban education is the extent to which it uses group instruction and a standardized pedagogy to promote a profoundly <u>individualistic</u>, competitive agenda.

In a rural context, this competition seems more remote -- perhaps because the "ladder" is short, there's an emphasis on self-employment, and all the local organizations are *small-scale* ones that operate on the basis of

personal and familial relationships. One of the ironies of rural education is the extent to which it uses individualized instruction and a more personal pedagogy to promote a fundamentally communitarian, cooperative agenda.

Rural schools have been given fewer resources to carry out a more complex mandate than their urban counterparts. They know that some of their graduates must be prepared for that urban competition, others need to be prepared to succeed in a small community setting, and more than a few need to develop the capability to be "bi-cultural" and move back and forth comfortably between town and country.

By contrast, urban schools feel no particular pressure to prepare their students -- academically, vocationally or attitudinally -- for anything other than urban life.

In both urban and rural areas, there are shared values (if not a consensus) about the need to strongly inculcate basic academic skills. Still, there continue to be differing beliefs about the role of the school. Urban people tend to believe that schools serve the fairly narrow, technical function of equipping students with the requisite set of competencies. Any roles they play above and beyond that might be appreciated, but they still will be regarded essentially as "icing on the cake".

The same is not true in rural Nebraska. In the countryside, there is an abiding faith in the ability -- and necessity -- of schools playing a broader role as vital community institutions. In part, this is a legitimate expression of the need of rural people in a democratic society to feel like they have a measure of influence over *something* in their world (since they are only too aware of their inability to effect the weather, international agricultural markets, governmental policies, urban-based institutions and the other forces that shape their individual and collective lives). It also is the consequence of the rural tendency to see the inter-connectedness of all the components of their local community.

The important point is that these value differences are legitimate ones that are neither amenable to rapid change, nor appropriate targets of governmental intervention. The people in Hampton wanting to maintain their small school as a source of community identity and activity is no more (or less) selfish than the people in Papillion wanting advanced placement courses in order to give their children a "leg up" in the urban

competition for professional careers and high-status lifestyles.

In a democratic society, such differences can -- indeed, must -- be accepted and accommodated. Yet, what seems to have happened in Nebraska is that urban and rural interests increasingly have come to distrust one another's good intentions and to regard *differing* priorities as illegitimate or extravagant. Unless, and until, this divide is bridged, the wounds are healed and a more unified sense of the *public* interest emerges, Nebraska's schools will not reach their considerable potential for educational excellence.
What is needed is a compelling vision of the future -- and a group of positive, forward-looking, effective leaders -- around which *all* of the state's contentious rivals can rally. Unfortunately, both vision and leadership have been in short supply.

Accordingly, Nebraska's rivalries grow more entrenched all the time. The day is fast approaching when the battle lines will be so rigid, the arguments so well-rehearsed, the inertia so well-established and the skids so well-greased that genuine progress in the educational arena will become next to impossible. Some would argue that day *already* has arrived . . .

None of the parties in this debate has the corner on truth and wisdom. Each group exists because each represents a legitimate constituency with legitimate concerns. The problem is that people remain so preoccupied with promoting their own vested interests that the larger <u>common</u> interests they all should share fall by the wayside. Nebraskans must recapture that intangible, but all-important, sense of *interdependence* , if the state's pre-eminent educational reputation is to last into the new millennium.

Nebraska's children deserve better than they are receiving as a result of all this wrangling. So do the state's small rural K-12 school systems. These districts are using every trick in the book to continue bringing their students a good quality education -- despite inadequate resources, despite a lack of encouragement from the state, despite professional and political biases against them, and despite the pressures of always feeling at risk.

That they have succeeded so well despite such adversity is a tribute to all the rural educators, parents, and community leaders who have refused to allow their children to be educationally handicapped simply because they live beyond the city limits.

This combination of noble acts at the local level and ignoble acts at the state level cannot continue much longer without irreparably tearing the fabric of Nebraska's educational and political systems. Nebraska currently has a *good* system of rural K-12 schools -- better, in fact, than it deserves given both the financial resources and external assistance devoted to helping them reach their full potential. However, in our ever more complex and demanding world, "good" is not good enough.

Nebraska needs better rural schools, just as it needs better *urban* ones. But, it does *not* need bigger schools in order to accomplish this goal. The traditional fixation with size must be laid to rest, in light of the clear evidence that neither quality nor efficiency are dependent upon making these K-12 systems larger, or fewer in number.

The debate about the structure of educational delivery systems -- beyond the emerging agreement to organize all systems on a K-12 basis -- is an unhealthy diversion away from the far more vital search for ways to improve the quality of schools of *every* size.

The first challenge for Nebraska's rural educators is to move beyond old enmities with urban educators and to form a united force capable of securing the major new funding *both* require to continue along their differing paths to educational excellence. The second challenge is to create convincing visions of the meanings and manifestations of a first-rate *rural* education. The final challenge is to effectively implement these visions.

The time has come to end Nebraska's unique brand of "class conflict". The state no longer can afford the luxury of having the various classes of school systems pitted against one another. Perhaps one strategy for defusing the conflict is to eliminate these divisive classifications altogether.

The symbolic act of dismissing the class system, and creating a "classless" education structure might usher in a new era in Nebraska. This era could become one in which the Cornhusker state is distinguished not only by a universal commitment to educational excellence, but also by the reality of diverse visions and paths leading to well-educated people, strong communities, a productive economy and a healthy, democratic society.

Nebraska already has the foundation upon which to build the finest rural schools in the nation. However, if this potential is discarded, and rural

schools are forced into becoming pale imitations of metropolitan ones, then Nebraska will end up as a state in which "geography is destiny".

And yet, if the inherent strengths of rural schools are embraced and extended, then Nebraska will end up as a state in which educational equity and rural rejuvenation become more than mere rhetoric. In either case, it is certain that Nebraska will reap precisely what it sows.

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